

Blends: Developing Creative Vocabulary Building Activities

By Carmem Teresa Do Nascimento Elias

Teachers can profit a lot from the processes of word formation as a powerful source for students' understanding and acquisition of vocabulary. In fact, vocabulary exploitation in books often resorts to notions of morphology, such as recognition of affixes and compound words as important topics in the development of reading strategies. One process of word formation, however, still deserves further attention: *Blends*.

This article does not aim at providing detailed explanations or theories. On the contrary, it is an illustrative paper which consists of the presentation and classification of several cases of blends found in authentic texts from magazines, advertisements, and other sources, with the purpose of providing teachers with material and ideas taken from personal research. Thus, many examples are given to help teachers select materials for their classroom activities. Explanations are given as a necessary means to the understanding of the subject. Theory is developed following the principles established by Valerie Adams in *An Introduction to Modern English Word-Formation*.

Blends: Definition

Different from other processes of word formation such as compounding and derivation, blends do not consist of the combination of established morphemes and groups of morphemes. (See Footnote 1 below)

On the contrary, blends are words made up of parts of morphemes, or as Valerie Adams calls them, *splinters*. (See Footnote 2 below) For instance, the word *smog* is a blend because it is formed by the combination of the splinters *sm-* and *-og*, which are parts of the morphemes *smoke* and *fog*.

Valerie Adams lists three types of blends. Here, we will deal with only two.

Blends: Type 1

The first type of blends consists of words that cannot be analysed into constituents, but that contain elements which may remind us of other words similar to them.

The word *squirl*, for instance, reminds us of the words *squiggle* and *squirm*, or *swirl*, *twirl*, and *whirl*. (See Footnote 3 below) In this case, it is very interesting to notice how these words have a similar meaning and a similar form, as if the idea of "turning" were condensed in the splinters -

irl or *squi-*. Of course, these splinters are not morphemes because they have no meaning in the language when found in isolation. However, it cannot be denied that these splinters appear in a group of words, all of which carry a similar meaning.

Another example is found in the following joke taken from *Reader's Digest* :

Happy New Year!

"We jingle the bells in December and juggle the bills in January."

In this case, an idea of movement is expressed by *-gle* , and the author makes use of the similarity of form and meaning in *jingle* and *juggle* for a comic purpose. Movement may also be expressed by *j-* (or phoneme [dz]) as suggested in the words *jerk*, *jet*, *jiggle*, *jitney*, *jitterbug*, *jitters*, *jive*, *jog*, *joggle*, *jolt*, *jostle*, *journey*, *jump* , and others.

The same thing happens, for instance, in the words *smoke*, *smog*, *smother*, *smolder* (or *smoulder*), and *smudge* . Isn't it rather evident that the form *sm(o)* carries the same meaning in all these words?

In fact, with the use of a good dictionary, it is possible to trace a vast number of groups of words which contain such discernible parts of morphemes, which are called *phonoasthemes* (see Footnote 4 below) by Valerie Adams. These elements most certainly deserve additional research and study since very little is known about the origins and the reasons for the use of the phonoasthemes. Some cases may involve a diachronic analysis of the language. Nevertheless, explanations for the use of phonoasthemes must still be developed on the grounds of the present form of the language. As a matter of fact, blends formed by phonoasthemes constitute a modern process of word formation. New words are usually formed following the similarities of form and meaning they have with other words already existent in the language.

In *Reader's Digest* there is a section called *Sniglets*. It consists of a list of invented words created by the authors in order to make the readers laugh. It cannot be denied that the name given to this section is a neologism that reminds us of *snigger* . Both words carry the phonoastheme *snig-* and the implication of laughter. One of the invented words found in this section is *strumble*, which the authors define as an invisible object over which you pretend to trip to hide your own clumsiness. As it can be seen, *strumble* is a neologism that reminds us of the words *stumble* and *trip*.

Modern literature can also provide us with some good examples of blends. For instance, Gwendolyn Brooks, a modern African-American writer, created the word *slooshing*, in her poem *Life for my child is simple, and is good* (see Footnote 5 below). The word is used to describe the sound of water falling and spreading across the floor, a stylistic process that increases the poetic tone of the work. However, it is also a case of blend, since *slooshing* "reminds" us of the words *sloshing*, *slosh*, *slop*, *sloppiness*, *slough*, *sludge*, *sluice*, *slush* , all of which carry the same phonoastheme *sl(o)*, similar in form and in some features of meaning.

Suggestions for Classroom Activities

Wouldn't it be interesting to make our students aware of the process of word formation found in such cases?

Issues of *Reader's Digest*, for example, can be taken to the classroom. Students, in groups, can read the section *Sniglets* or other sections, in search of blends. Such an activity, though very simple, can help our students understand better the humorous component of such texts. Besides, reading for comic purposes is an excellent way of building students' enthusiasm in the process of reading as a whole.

Also, poems, as the one mentioned above, can be used at first for the development of reading strategies, understanding of main ideas, perception of cultural insights, and social background. Then, while dealing with specific vocabulary, teachers can profit from words such as *slooshing* to practice dictionary use. Students can be encouraged to find lists of words with the same phonoasthemes. The discovery of such similarities stimulates students' curiosity and contributes to their vocabulary enrichment.

An interesting exercise consists of asking students to write a list of words with meanings associated to the word two. Students come across words like *twice*, *twain*, *twilights*, *'tween*, *twelve*, *twenty*, *tweezers*, *twin*, *twine*, *twist*. Students learn a lot of new words and memorize them easily, since they are all associated.

Blends: Type 2

The second type of blends according to Valerie Adams' classification consists of words seen as contracted forms of compounds; that is, "words in which one element is fragmentary when compared with its corresponding uncompound word form."

This second type of blends is very common in the 20th century. (Very few cases are found in earlier periods.) The words thus formed constitute neologisms *consciously* formed, and the reader is often aware of the elements that are combined in their formation. Besides, these blends are coined for different purposes to suppress the necessities of the language to name new elements or products that are created.

Let's have a look at some examples:

1. Blends can be created for scientific purposes to name chemical products, new substances, new medicine:

Gasohol = *gasoline* and *alcohol*

Time Magazine, January 21, 1980, page 39 presents an article called "The Gasohol Power."

2. Blends are also used in economics to name new monetary systems, new coins:

Petrodollar = an invented monetary value made up of the words *petroleum* and *dollar*.

3. Blends are used to name new occupations created in the 20th century.

Photojournalist = *photographs* and *journalist*,

Televangelist = a combination of *television* and *evangelist*.

4. New categories of television programs are also named by a process of blend formation:
Docudrama = a combination of television *documentary* and *drama* . See *Time Magazine* ,
February 25, 1985. "The Dangers of Docudrama."

5. Blends also provide meaningful stylistic resources, often used in poetry to create a
psychological effect, to make the ideas shortened and especially, more expressive.

Drysert = *dry* and *desert*

This same effect is also found in the language of newspapers and articles, in which blends are
used to make the subject sound more dramatic.

Killerquake = a combination of *killer* and *earthquake* . (Taken from *Time Magazine* , 1981, from
an article called "Killerquake, a scene from the inferno."

6. Following this same principle of stylistic significance, blends are also largely used for a
commercial purpose in advertisements.

A *delifreshing* sensation!

Join *jeaneration*.

7. Blends are also largely used for funny purposes.

"Test your Eggspertise" - a joke found in *Reader's Digest* January 1985, page 51. Three blends
appeared here:

eggspertise = a combination of *eggs* and *expertise*.

eggspert = *egg* and *expert*.

eggsactly = *eggs* and *exactly*.

Many magazines often read by adolescents are rich sources of blends for comic purposes. They
provide an excellent opportunity for teachers to develop students' interest in reading and
vocabulary acquisition by means of funny classroom activities.

Suggestions for Classroom Activities

Encourage your students to bring to class jokes, magazines, and periodicals they enjoy reading (in English, of course). Many times, students love these reading materials, but they don't fully understand the meanings of such jokes. With the help of their teachers, they can "have a kick out of the English reading lessons."

Bring to the classroom some issues of *Reader's Digest/Mad Magazine* and many other reading material for teenagers. Select those sections in which you have found blends and ask your students to explain their meanings.

Encourage your students to create their own blend for comic purposes. Even beginners can profit from this activity. For example, after the study of vocabulary related to animals or food, students can be asked to play the role of crazy scientists. On a sheet of paper, they can draw a strange mutation, name it, and explain its origin. For example:

Rhinocephant = the son of a *rhinoceros* and an *elephant*.

Lionfly = a *lion* with *butterfly wings*.

Here, students can exercise the vocabulary related to animals, use their imagination, create freely in the foreign language, and express their artistic tendencies when drawing.

Intermediate students can also coin new words to practice grammatical structures such as the comparative. For example:

Rosalic = a *rose* that smells as bad as *garlic*.

Manraffe = a *man* as tall as a *giraffe*.

Even more advanced students can write games for their classmates. Students should name "creatures" according to their classmates' commands. For example:

Student A: "What is it? An elephant that flies with its ears? It's not Jumbo."

Classroom: "Earphant" or some other combinations.

Make sure that the students understand the difference between the words that are incorporated into the language, because they were created with a serious purpose (photojournalism, petrodollar), and others that are created in one specific occasion with a momentary purpose, such as the blends created in the activities suggested here. Students must be aware that words like earphant are a mere game.

Conclusion

Though Valerie Adams considers three cases of blends, I have considered only two in this article. The third case consists of the addition of specific suffixes to a word, thus forming groups of word resemblance. In the word *folknik*, for example, the suffix *nik* is added to the word *folk* in

a way that it reminds us of the word beatnik. Although we also have groups of words sharing similarities here, I would rather consider this third case of blends a special type of suffixation, and, as such, a case to be studied as a process of derivation. For this reason, I did not discuss it in this paper.

As far as blends are concerned, they constitute a rich source for the creation of new words and the development of interesting and motivating classroom activities. In all examples I have shown, the blends constitute instances of the creativity of the language, and of its capacity to coin new words to express the necessities of its speakers. Their presence in authentic texts indicate the relevance of their study. Possibilities are many. I have mentioned only a few. It's up to you now, teachers!

Carmem Teresa Do Nascimento Elias teaches English at Santa Ursula University and at Colégio Pedro II in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

References

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- The National Council of Teachers of English. 1975. English For Today. McGraw- Hill Book Company.
- Several magazines such as Time, Reader's Digest, Mad, Newsweek.

Footnote 1

Valerie Adams 1973 defines a morpheme as "a fragment which cannot be further broken down."

Footnote 2

For a more detailed explanation of splinters see Valerie Adam's book, page 142.

Footnote 3

Examples taken from Valerie Adams, page 140.

Footnote 4

According to Valerie Adams, phonoasthemes are "elements which have a discernible identity in word groups."

Footnote 5

Poem found in the book English for Today, book six: Literature in English, by the National Council of Teachers of English, second edition, page 255.